



Tip of the

Prevention Information from CSAP's Western Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies

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Is Mentoring a Best Practice?

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This question has surfaced prominently as mentoring rides a tide of optimism and interest. The answer to this question is "yes" in instances when a mentoring program has been researched and proven effective. As a more general strategy, research on the effectiveness of mentoring is inconclusive and somewhat mixed, but it is beginning to shed light on factors that may enhance a mentoring effort.

Traditional mentoring, as outlined in the Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) model (Tierney, Grossman & Resch, 1995), is the prominent best practice that uses a mentoring strategy to reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors in youth. In the BBBS program, one-on-one relationships are established between well-screened and trained adult mentors and youth mentees. The relationship is structured, supervised and supported by program staff.

The BBBS study cited above boasts the following outcomes in youth mentees:

- 46% less likelihood to initiate drug use during the study period
- 27% less likely to initiate alcohol use than control youth
- 33% less likely to hit someone

Participant youth were also better than comparison youth in academic behavior, attitudes, and performance.

One of CSAP's model programs using mentoring strategies is the Across Ages program that includes three components: elders mentoring youth, youth performing community service, and teacher training.

Replication of a best practice, such as the BBBS and Across Ages model, offers preventionists the highest assurance of achieving favorable outcomes with a mentoring initiative. If adapting these, it is advisable to retain the fidelity of the research design.

In a recent literature review we conducted on the effectiveness of mentoring as a general strategy, two points of insight emerged:

- 1) Mentoring programs that are not best practices should be systematically evaluated to determine effectiveness.
- 2) More research is needed before mentoring as a general strategy can be considered scientifically defensible.

While research on best practice programs produced impressive results, generalizing these findings to mentoring as a broader strategy may create unrealistic expectations. Further research will eventually illuminate a clear path for creating an effective mentoring program. Until then, scientifically-defensible best practices are the preventionist's *best bet*.

* Tierney, J., Grossman, J., & Resch, N. (1995). *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.

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